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Black Hebrew Members Suspect Of Defrauding Banks, 2 Airlines

CHICAGO, Dec. 1 — Members of a Chicago-based religious sect known as the Black Hebrews are operating a systematic fraud and theft scheme in which local banks and two airlines have been ripped off of \$4.4 million in the last 15 months, federal investigators have charged.

Authorities suspect that much of the stolen money is being funneled to the 2,000-person Black Hebrew colony in Israel, headed by a charismatic former Chicagoan, whom Israeli government officials fear may be creating another Jonestown.

Banking officials in other cities where the sect has organized — particularly Atlanta and Washington — have also reported fraud and theft attributed to members of the sect, which preaches that blacks are the true inheritors of the biblical land of Israel.

"Recently, we have become aware of a number of crimes that are attributable to members of this organization,"

said James O. Ingram, special agent in charge of the Chicago FBI office. "Culprits don't identify themselves as Black Hebrews, and this problem may have been going on for some time."

American and Delta airlines and some banks and savings and loans in the Chicago area have reported thefts that were linked to the Black Hebrews.

The FBI stresses that it is not investigating the Black Hebrew organization itself, but only individual suspects. Members of the group, based at a South Side Chicago storefront church, disavow the actions of what they call a small, criminal fringe.

In many of the alleged fraud schemes, a Black Hebrew got a job as a clerk or bank teller and, after a few months, stole or forged a small number of large checks, authorities said. In many cases, fraudulently obtained funds were wire-transferred to Europe. Investigators believe that at least a portion of the money is making its way to the Black Hebrews in Israel.

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